‘I’m Fit To Be Tied’ Or ‘The Baby Chicks’

“I’m fit to be tied,” my mother gasped as she looked out of the window. Down into the yard. Looking too over her shoulder. Seeing the mess, Noreen stifling a scream, muttered, “they all seem so flat, so small, so still, “like tiny balls of cream wool.” Katie was there. She was so young. So still with her small hands over her mouth.

Mother kept hens in the back loft at the bottom of the yard. Slap bang in the middle of Keady Town. The back yard was a generous space leading down to an ‘entry way’ to the sunny grove

and railway line beyond. You could, after a few skips, be in the countryside. Just like that.

Previously a field had been rented a mile out of Chapel Street just at the crossroads. Having come from a farming household. Sarah loved that field. We loved it. Cutting and bailing the hay in summer. Drinking cold tea from glass bottles with thick breaded Keady loaves. Laden with Blackberry jam sandwiches. The hens were kept at the side of the field, penned in near to the gate.

We would pick the blackberries off the hedges. Sell most of them in McCarthy’s shop in town, then

enjoy spending the usual three pence or if you were lucky, six pence on sweets.

A trick to be paid six pence was to add water to your pick. Not enough to have them swim. Just the right amount to increase the weight.

On returning to school in the autumn. The hens needed their meal top up. The grass would be dried up and sparse after the summer months. Noreen would be designated, on our usual school lunch break, to ride on the rickety bike out to feed them.
“Remember to close the gate,” Sarah would shout as she set off.

On Sundays, after our outing to our grandfather’s farm, we would swing around the road to check on the hens.

“They are all dead,” James cried returning to the car. Tears flooding his eyes. And so they were. Noreen got the blame. “You didn’t close the gates on the pen,” mum screamed, as she clouted her with her head scarf, “Bad scrant to you young madam.”

But on further inspection we all could see the gates were undisturbed. There was a sizeable hole in the chicken wire. It was

clear to see the redish foxes’ hair clinging to its surface.

New agriculture thinking around the rearing of hens soon became the norm. Deep litter rearing. Sarah, hearing it on the news, knew we could do this. So it happened. The field was given up. The eggs continued to be washed, packed weekly and delivered to ‘The Egg Store.’ For that tidy extra income that my mother treasured.

Noreen now had a new chore. Her faith restored. That was a job she hated. She suffered travel sickness. Every so often there would be a box of new born baby

chickens to be collected at the bus station in Armagh. Usually on a Saturday. Although she loved being in Armagh, when the nausea subsided. She dreaded the journey swinging round the many bends of the Keady road to Armagh, especially at Girvan's Bridge.

'Woolworths' had a tray of broken biscuits that could be bought for three pence. She treasured her 'thrupney bit' and proudly let it go for those tasty bites.

Sitting with the chirpy tiny chicks, she felt enchanted as they also distracted her sick feeling on

the way home. Yellow fluffy chicks peeping through the tiny openings of that well sealed, large square cardboard box.

Reaching the bottom steps out through the basement, Sarah and Noreen reached the distraught child Katie. All the chicks were dead. “I just petted them,” she cried. “Just squeezed them a tiny bit. Now they are all asleep. Won’t waken up,” she added in her four year old way. My wee sister. That was the day my mum stopped rearing the chickens in the deep littered hen loft. Selling the olders ones off. We knew they would be missed.

No more freshly wrung chickens to defeather or cook. Saturday eggs washing and selling gone. Extra thrupenny bits to spend no more. No baby chicks to buy. We all remember now the phrase she used. That old Northern Irish saying, “I’m fit to be tied.” On that sunny awful day my sister squeezed the chicks to death.